

Timeless Beauty

الجمال
الخالد

An introduction to Arabic scripts and calligraphy

My fascination with Arabic calligraphy

Arabic calligraphy has an incredible allure for me. My fascination with the different Arabic scripts has come about from the intersection of several important areas of my life.

I have lived in Egypt for the past 24 years (first having grown up in Canada), and am surrounded by Arabic language. I have been a learner of Arabic for years, and have also developed teaching materials for Arabic learners. Arabic not only appeals to me linguistically, but also historically. I can wander through medieval Islamic Cairo for hours, in and around al-Azhar University, one of the most renowned centers of Islamic learning (and calligraphy) in the world. Incidentally, it is also my favorite place to sit in a coffee shop and watch the world go by.



I became a student of art history several years ago when my oldest daughter developed an interest in visual art, and Islamic art is highly centered around Arabic calligraphy. There is something about the beauty of its geometry, the infinite variations that can be made from 28 letters, and the use of different colors and mediums that draws me in.

And I am a communicator. I teach courses in Rhetoric and Composition at the American University in Cairo. I speak publicly on a wide variety of topics. I am a blogger and writer. The power of the written Arabic language to communicate ideas that have changed the world, both in the past and in the present, give it a timelessness that only intensifies the fascination.

In the course of the past year as I have interacted with people on my blog thearabiclearner.com, I have been asked recurring questions about Arabic calligraphy. This booklet is a short overview of the eight most important scripts that can help you immediately identify almost any sample of Arabic calligraphy that you see.

I have also included four practical steps that you can take to begin to master Arabic calligraphy. If you have been thinking about doing this, maybe it's time to take the first step.

Enjoy!

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Historical background of the Arabic script

The earliest forms of Arabic writing from the 4th century AD evolved from ancient Nabatean script. The Nabateans were a pre-Arab civilization that flourished in northern Arabia and the southern Levant between 100 BC and 100 AD, building the city of Petra, one of the world's most stunning architectural and archeological sites.

Prior to the rise of Islam, Arabic was mostly recited rather than written. With the revelation of the Qur'an in the early 7th century AD, this changed. Arabic script was used to write the Qur'an, and over time many different Arabic writing scripts came into use for this purpose. Arabic use also increased with the spread of the Islamic empire, and Arabic scripts were adapted to meet the administrative needs of the growing empire, giving birth to a wide range of scripts used in Arabic calligraphy.

Muslims are required to learn the Qur'an in Arabic, the language in which it was first recited by the Prophet Muhammed. Therefore Arabic script spread with Islam and was eventually used to write other languages as well, such as Persian (Iran), Urdu (India and Pakistan), Dari (Afghanistan), Ottoman Turkish (until 1928) and the languages of Indonesia and Malaysia (until recently).

For many centuries, Arabic script was the most widely used scientific and educational script in the world. During the early Middle Ages (also known as the Dark Ages in Europe), Arabic script was used to preserve many of the classical texts that were lost or destroyed in Europe.



Koran (fragment), leaf no. 10
Courtesy of Library of Congress
ascs 288 <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.amed/ascs.288>

Form and use of Arabic calligraphy

The word by which Arabic script is known in Arabic is 'khatt' (خط). This word is derived from the term for 'line', 'design', or 'construction'. It is an appropriate name, because one of the most striking features of the script is its use of lines, whether flowing with sweeping curves, or bold and angular.

Arabic script is cursive, meaning that many of its letters join together and take various forms depending where in the word the letter appears. Because Arabic is a cursive language, each of its letters can be written in at least two different forms, and often four. The form depends on where in the word the letter occurs. There is a form for each letter that appears at the beginning of a word, in the middle of a word, at the end of a word, or as an isolated letter on its own.



Courtesy of Aieman Khimji
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/aieman/214986349/>

The traditional instrument of the Arabic calligrapher is the 'qalam' (قَلَم), a pen made of dried reed or bamboo. Arabic script was originally written on parchment and papyrus, however with the discovery and spread of paper making in the Islamic empire, Arabic calligraphy flourished. While monasteries in Europe would guard a handful of cherished manuscripts written on parchment, libraries in the Islamic world were bursting with hundreds or thousands of manuscripts written on paper.

Arabic calligraphy was also written on tiles, containers, carpets, building inscriptions, and coins. In the religious context in which Arabic was written, any representation of a human or animal form was deemed to be idolatrous. This caused Arabic calligraphy to flourish, not only as a means of communication but as an art form. It was used to create beautiful, intricate expressions of art that are as expressive and evocative as the language itself.

How to recognize different Arabic Calligraphy styles

Over the years, various forms of Arabic calligraphy developed. Each form is recognizable as a distinct script, with a unique look and defining characteristics. By understanding these defining features, you will be able to recognize the different styles of Arabic calligraphy.

Each form of calligraphy was developed for different purposes and needs. Religious texts needed to be solemn and clear. Poetry called for a flowing shape and form for expression. Government documents required a written form that was difficult to counterfeit. A form of fast handwriting developed for taking notes.

Examples of each of the most well-known Arabic scripts can be found below, along with descriptions of their defining characteristics. By comparing the various styles and becoming familiar with their forms, origins, and uses, you will soon be able to recognize the different Arabic calligraphy styles at a glance.



Anonymous Arabic and Persian poetic verses
Courtesy of Library of Congress
ascs 163 <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.amed/asc.163>



Anonymous Arabic and Persian poetic verses
 Courtesy of Library of Congress
 asc 163 <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.amed/asc.163>



Bowl decorated with Arabic calligraphy
 Courtesy of The Israel Museum, Jerusalem
<http://www.imj.org.il/imagines/collections/item.asp?itemNum=373958>

Kufic Script	خط الكوفي
Pronunciation	"koo-fic"
Origin	• The oldest form of Arabic script, related to ancient Nabatean. • Developed in 7th century AD, used until Naskh became widespread in 8th to 12th century. • Developed near Kufa, Iraq
Form	• Rigid, angular strokes • Simple and elegant forms became embellished over time • Short, broad vertical strokes, long extended horizontals
Use	• Earliest writing of the Qur'an • Titles of manuscripts • Inscriptions on buildings • Square Kufic used on coins, tiles, etc. in 13th century onward
Notes	• Kufic is difficult to write because its letters must be drawn in with a pen rather than written as a series of pen strokes

Naskh Script

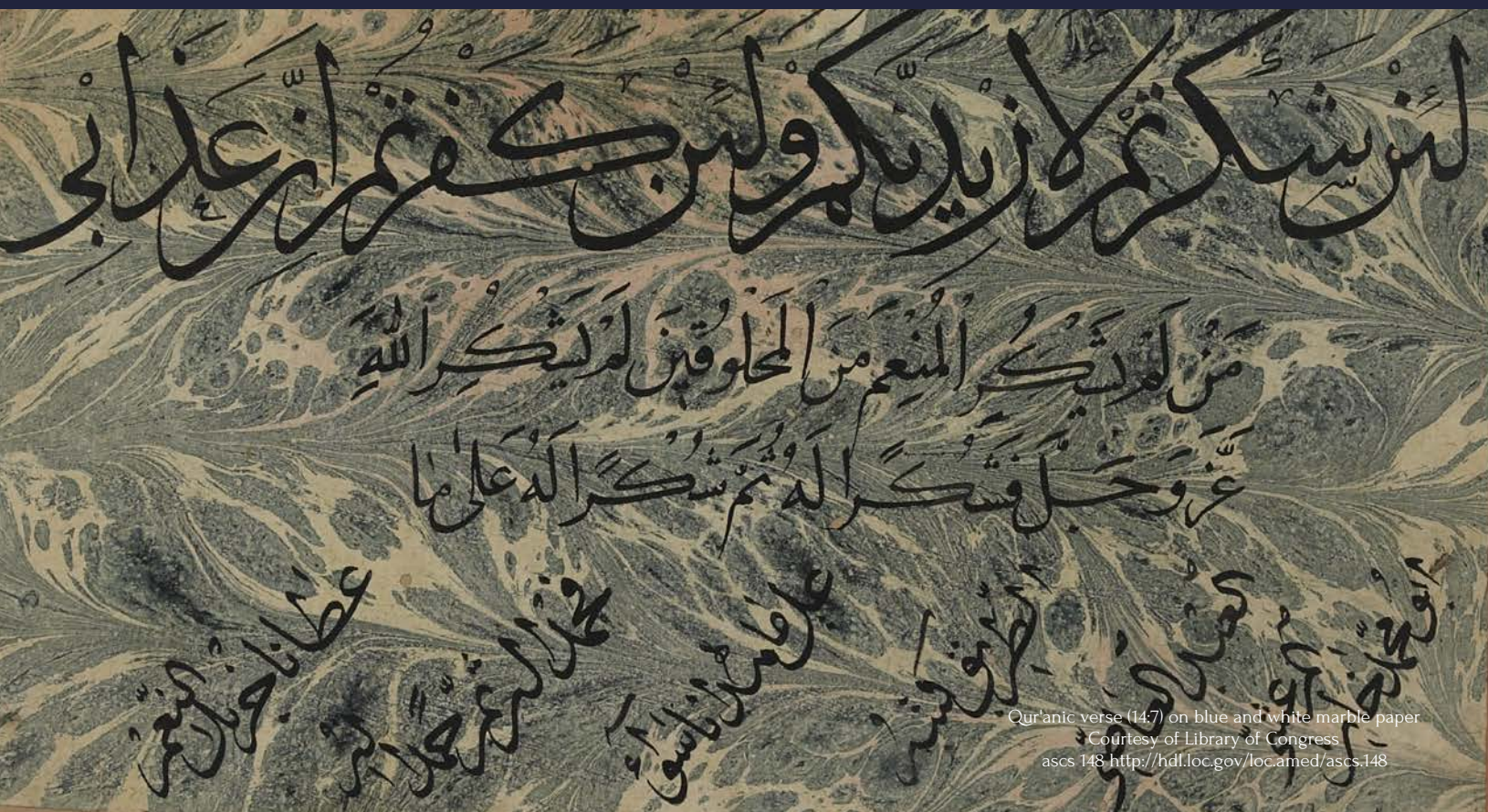
خط النسخ

Naskh Script	خط النسخ
Pronunciation	"nask" (approximate)
Origin	- Comes from the word "nasakha" which means to copy or transcribe - Ibn Muqla (886-940 AD) established standardized rules for writing a script as beautiful as Kufic (suitable for the Qur'an), but highly legible, clear, and quick to write
Form	- Letter shapes fluid and curved - Letters lean slightly to the left - Descending letters end in upright hook - Equal division between flat and round shapes and heavy and light strokes
Use	- From 12th century used for writing government documents and also for copying the Qur'an - Popular for writing books because of its legibility
Notes	- More Qur'an's are written in Naskh than in all other scripts combined - Used as the basis for modern Arabic print

Bowl
Courtesy of Bristol Museums, Galleries & Archives
<http://museums.bristol.gov.uk/display.php?irn=151089>



Interlinear Qur'an (5: 89-95)
Courtesy of Library of Congress
asc.112 <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc/med/asc.112>



Thuluth Script	خط الثلث
Pronunciation	"thoo-looth"
Origin	- Comes from the Arabic word meaning "one third" - Origin of "one third" may be that one third of each letter slopes, or may be that the pen is one third of the size of a pen used for a larger script - First appeared in 11th century AD
Form	- Vertical strokes have a leftward slant, horizontals have a deep curve - Ends of descending letters come up in a hook - Often written so that letters interlace - Makes use of alternate letter forms
Use	- An elegant, cursive script used for mosque decorations, writing the Qur'an, ornate titles, etc. - Favored by the Mamluke rules of Egypt (13th to 16th century AD), used extensively in Ottoman Empire
Notes	- Some of the oldest existing copies of the Qur'an are written in Thuluth script - Used in famous inscriptions like the Taj Mahal, also on the flag of Saudi Arabia



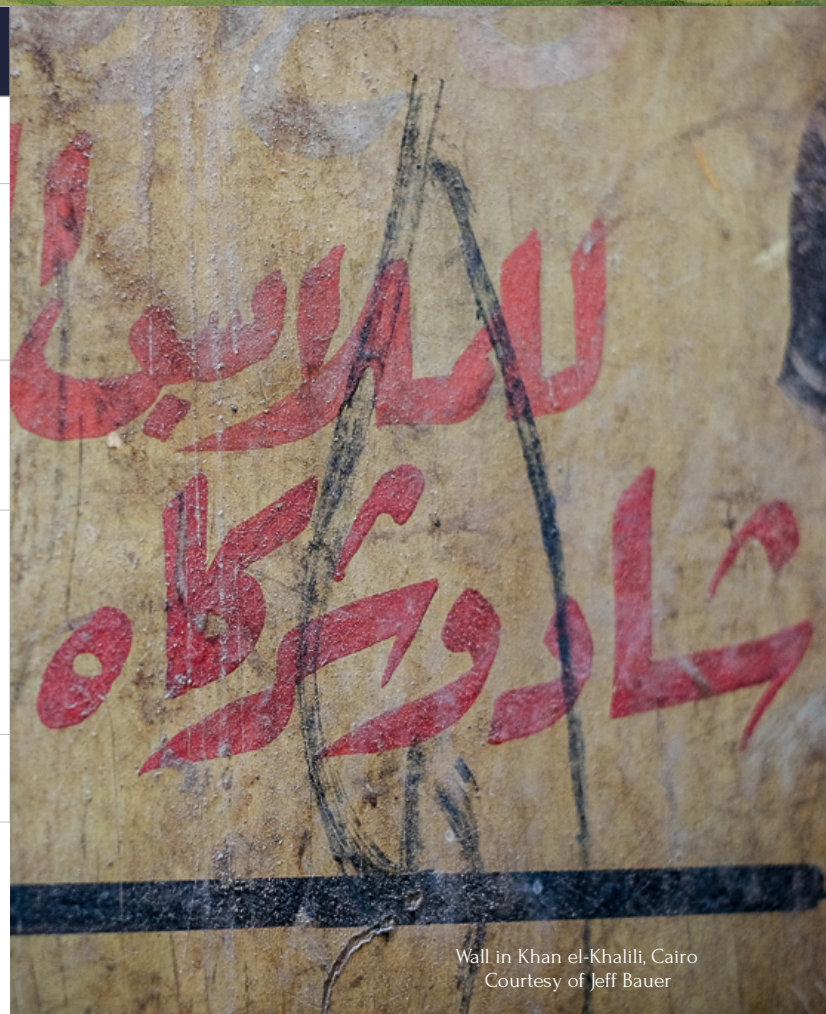
بوبرنوع السكينة ما يجي ايجونه اسكه شرا بايد بر مقدر ر غم زیت
 ايجير لسه د وجودينك لهر طره فنه سرائتا اتمك ايجونه
 بومان اوزره ايجير لک لازم کلور

74



Book on horses, Healing a horse suffering from colic with old wine and olive oil, Walters Art Museum Ms. W661, fol. 74a
 Courtesy of Walters Art Museum

Riq'ah Script	خط الرقعة
Pronunciation	"rik-ah" (approximate)
Origin	- Derived from naskh and also thuluth, as early as 9th century AD - Developed as a simple handwriting style
Form	- Simple with short strokes and little flourishes - Also includes straight and even lines of text
Use	- Most commonly used form of handwriting - Most common script used in Ottoman Turkey - Now used in titles of books and magazines, ads, etc.
Notes	Not usually written with vowels



Wall in Khan el-Khalili, Cairo
 Courtesy of Jeff Bauer



Copper work in Khan el-Khalili
Courtesy of Jeff Bauer

Diwani Script	الخط الديواني
Pronunciation	"dee-WA-nee"
Origin	• Originated during reign of early Ottoman Turks (16th and 17th century) • Developed by Housam Roumi for use in the "Divan" - the Ottoman court
Form	• Wide spaces between lines • Lines ascend upward as they move from right to left • Riq'a Diwani style has no decorations and lines are mostly straight • Jeli Diwani style has intertwined letters, is punctuated and decorated to appear as one piece
Use	• Used for court documents, decrees, resolutions • Still used for ornate occasions, greeting cards, etc.
Notes	• Diwani script is very difficult to read or write due to intertwining letters and rules for vowel markings. This made it ideal for official documents, since it was hard to forge or decipher



The phrase Bismillah in an 18th century Islamic calligraphy from the Ottoman region
Public Domain

Muhaqqaq Script

خط محقق

Part of Al-Alaq - 96th sura of the Quran
Public Domain



Muhaqqaq Script	الخط المحقق
Pronunciation	"mu-HA-kak" (approximate)
Origin	- Word means "consummate" or "clear" - Originally used to refer to any masterful work of calligraphy - Developed in 9th to 11th century
Form	- Precise, angular, upright - Horizontal emphasis - Descending strokes end in points rather than upward hooks - Descending round strokes often encircle other letters
Use	- Used for copying large texts from the Qur'an - Used in many architectural inscriptions in the Mamluke era in Egypt
Notes	- Beautiful but difficult to write - Mostly obsolete today but still used to write the "bismillah" (بسم الله).



Qur'anic Verses
1400-1499
Public Domain

Nasta'liq Script

خط نستعلیق

Nasta'liq script	خط نستعلیق
Pronunciation	"nastaleek" (approximate)
Origin	- Originally designed for the Persian language - Perfected in the 14th century by the calligrapher Mir Ali al-Tabrizi
Form	- Traditionally the predominant font in Persian calligraphy - Among most fluid of Arabic script styles - Short verticals with no serifs - Long horizontal strokes
Use	- Popular in Iran and Mughal India from 16th century AD - Many central Asian languages rely on variations of Nasta'liq script (Dari, Pashto, Uzbek, Turkman, Punjabi, Urdu, Kashmiri, etc.)
Notes	According to legend, the famous calligrapher Mir Ali al-Tabrizi developed it after dreaming of flying geese





Maghribi Script	الخط المغربي
Pronunciation	"mah-gre-bee" (approximate)
Origin	- Evolved in the 10th century - Name comes from the Arabic word for "western", referring to north-west Africa and Spain where it was developed
Form	- Descending strokes have large bowls with sweeping curves (loops) - Strokes tend to be of uniform thickness - Written on a horizontal baseline - Vowel markings are often flat rather than slanted
Use	Used for writing the Qur'an and other scientific, legal, and religious manuscripts Page 13
Notes	Letters change shape based on the word they are in, rather than a series of pre-defined rules

4 Steps to mastering Arabic calligraphy

Arabic calligraphy is a skill that can be practiced and learned, often faster than you might expect. Although it is one of the most beautiful forms of art, it is not in fact as difficult to learn as some people think.



Folio from the "Blue" Qur'an
Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum

If you are interested in learning Arabic calligraphy, here are four steps I recommend to get you launched:

1. Learn the Arabic alphabet

There are 28 letters in the Arabic alphabet, and a number of vowel markings. Your first step toward creating beautiful Arabic calligraphy is to learn the alphabet. Unlike Chinese calligraphy with its hundreds and thousands of characters, there are only 28 letters in the Arabic alphabet - only slightly more than the 26 letters in the English alphabet. Many of these letters differ only in the number of dots written over or under them, so there are in fact only 18 letter forms.

Resources for learning the Arabic alphabet:

- <http://the arabiclearner.com/the-arabic-alphabet/>
- <http://web.stanford.edu/dept/lc/arabic/alphabet/chart.html>



Dr. Bashi Persian alphabet wood blocks
Courtesy of Dr. Bashi

2. Learn how to write each letter in all of its forms

Because each letter can have up to four different forms (initial, medial, final, and isolated), it is important to learn how to write each letter in each form with a regular pen or pencil, prior to starting into calligraphy. Your second step is to learn how to write each form, and to practice each form of each letter until you have reached a level of basic competence.

Resources for practicing writing each letter form:

- <http://design.tutsplus.com/tutorials/creative-arabic-calligraphy-for-beginners-introduction--cms-22116> (see exercises at end of page)
- <http://www.omniglot.com/writing/arabic.htm>

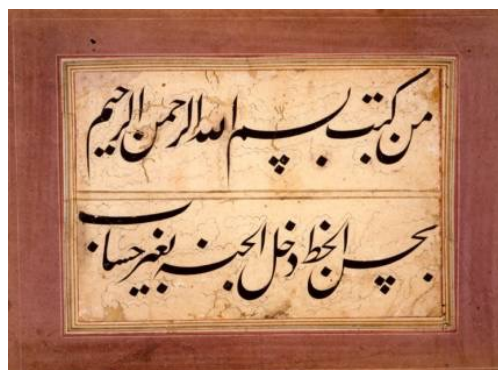


3. Expose yourself to as many different examples of Arabic calligraphy as possible

Once you have learned the basic forms of each letter, you will be able to observe Arabic calligraphy from a completely new perspective. Beautiful artistic expressions of calligraphy will take on meaning as you are able to see within them the individual letters and words. The more you expose yourself to as many different examples of Arabic calligraphy as possible, the faster you will find yourself growing in your ability to write your own beautiful and timeless Arabic calligraphy.

Resources for exposure to Arabic calligraphy:

- <http://www.hongkiat.com/blog/arabic-calligraphy-artworks/>
- <http://memory.loc.gov/intldl/apochtml/apochohome.html>



Levha
Courtesy of Library of Congress
asc103 <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.amed/asc103>

4. Take a course from a recognized Arabic calligrapher who is also an effective teacher

At this point in your journey, you are ready to actually begin learning from an expert teacher. The best way to learn Arabic calligraphy is to be taught by someone who is:

1. Internationally recognized for their work, in terms of its accuracy, beauty, and artistic expression
2. A capable and effective teacher who is able to present the process in step by step lessons, in clear language that you can understand, and is able to repeat lessons as many times as you need in order to learn.

In the past, having access to this combination of traits was not an easy thing, and would require traveling to famous centers of Islamic learning and art in places in Egypt, India, the Levant, or even China. Today this step has become much easier due to the internet.



For this step, the best recommendation I can make to you is taking a course offered by Omar Nizam Uddin, an Arabic calligrapher now based out of Toronto, Canada.

Omar grew up in Saudi Arabia, studied calligraphy under the direct guidance of Shaikh Ahmad Adil, and now is one of the foremost teachers of Arabic calligraphy today, having taught thousands of students online and in person. He is now based out of my hometown of Toronto, Canada. Omar is the author of the book “Learn to Write Arabic Calligraphy” (2013), one of the first books written in the English language teaching students Arabic Calligraphy in a comprehensive way.

Here is the link to the course, offered through udemy.com:

Become an Arabic Calligraphy Artist from Scratch

An 8-week comprehensive and step-by-step course to learn the Naskh, Thuluth, and Diwani scripts from absolute scratch.

It is a great course, and absolutely worth the investment if you are serious about mastering Arabic calligraphy.

Best wishes for your progress in learning Arabic calligraphy!

Special thanks to:

CalligraphyQalam.com 

An Introduction to Arabic, Ottoman and Persian Calligraphy

This is an excellent website with information on Arabic Calligraphy styles, calligraphers, processes, etc. Well worth visiting their gallery, and checking their resources page.

[SOAS Language Center - University of London](#)

Helpful overview of several calligraphy styles

[Creative Arabic Calligraphy for Beginners: Introduction](#)

Good historical overview, charts, and helpful exercises for beginners

[Library of Congress Selections of Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman Calligraphy](#)

Excellent catalogue of manuscripts and calligraphy samples in the library